



Kimberly A. Foster
Executive Director

LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS
TRULA J. WORTHY-CLAYTON, VICE CHAIR

APPROVED MINUTES

The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **January 7, 2008**, in room 739 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Carol O. Biondi
Ann Franzen
Susan F. Friedman
Helen A. Kleinberg
Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Rev. Cecil L. Murray
Tina Pedersen
Sandra Rudnick
Stacey Savelle
Adelina Sorkin
Dr. Harriette F. Williams
Trula J. Worthy-Clayton

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Patricia Curry

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The agenda for the January 7, 2008, meeting was unanimously approved as amended.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the December 17, 2007, meeting were unanimously approved

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Department of Children and Family Services director Trish Ploehn updated Commissioners on a number of issues.

- In 2007, a new governance structure placed Los Angeles County departments under the authority of a Chief Executive Officer, rather than the Board of Supervisors, and broke them into clusters under deputy chief executive officers. The children and families well-being cluster was initially headed by Bryce Yokomizo and then by Lisa Nuñez, both of whom have since retired. A permanent deputy chief executive officer for this cluster, Miguel Santana, began on December 26. He served as a deputy to Supervisor Gloria Molina for 14 years, entered private practice about eight months ago, and is now eager to return to county service. Ms. Ploehn suggested that he be invited to address the Commission once he has had a chance to settle into his new job.

Commissioner Biondi expressed continuing concerns over the separation of DCFS, in the children and families well-being cluster, from the Probation Department and the Department of Mental Health, in two other clusters. Many of the individual children and families these departments serve are the same, and many high-profile programs are jointly administered among them. With Probation in the public safety cluster, along with the Sheriff's Department and the District Attorney, how will Commissioners know if that department is serving children as well as it should?

Placing all departments that deal with children into a single cluster was discussed during the governance structure's design stage, Ms. Ploehn said, but so many are involved that the group would have been too large to function efficiently. As it is, Chief Executive Officer Bill Fujioka meets on Mondays with each member of the Board of Supervisors, and the heads of all clusters meet throughout the month with Board staff and communicate regularly with each other. In addition, the New Directions Task Force—heads of all human services departments, as well as their deputy chief executive officers—meets quarterly to deal with cross-cluster issues. Various mechanisms will be tested as the county transitions to the new governance arrangement, and the appointment of a permanent cluster head for children and families well-being should help things function more smoothly.

Commissioner Kleinberg suggested that Mr. Santana be asked to include representatives from the juvenile side of Probation and the children's side of Mental Health in all his cluster meetings. Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton recommended that a representative from the Department of Mental Health be invited to attend Commission meetings, along with Probation liaison Andrea Gordon. Commissioner Biondi requested that the Commission receive advance agendas for the quarterly meetings of the New Directions Task Force.

- DCFS's Century and Hawthorne offices have been combined into a new Vermont Corridor office at 83rd and Vermont, formally opened by Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke on December 10. The site's original building was heavily damaged during the civil disturbances of 1992 and left in disrepair for many years prior to its being razed and a beautiful new building constructed—easily the nicest in the DCFS system, Ms. Ploehn said. Along with DCFS (about 400 employees headed by Chuck Tadlock), the facility houses close to 1,000 Department of Public Social Services staff as well as

units from the Department of Mental Health and the Child Support Services Department. Everyone is excited about the co-location, Ms. Ploehn said, and about working together more efficiently. No concerns have been raised about the change in location for families previously served at the Century and Hawthorne offices, and the new building also addresses worries about a historical lack of resources in SPA 6.

Ms. Ploehn invited Commissioners to hold a meeting at the Vermont Corridor office soon (the relative care committee will meet there on January 29), suggesting a tour and perhaps presentations by the managers of the four co-located departments.

- A positive article is expected in the *Daily News* next weekend on DCFS's recent success with its runaway population, announced in a press release by Supervisor Mike Antonovich in late December. A few years ago, about 900 youth were reported missing, either as runaways or abductees, a figure that stemmed from much incorrect data—a two-year-old listed as a runaway, for example, when she had in fact been abducted. Once the bad data was cleared up in January 2006, the department verified 505 runaway youth, a number that had dropped by the end of 2006 to 409. At the end of 2007, runaways had been reduced to 285—a reduction of 30 percent in one year and 40 percent over two years.

Much of the decrease is due to DCFS's changed approach. For some time, it has assigned each runaway youth a Permanency Partners Program (P3) worker to locate them, find out why they left placement and where they'd rather be, and work out permanent arrangements for them. Many cross the Mexican border—DCFS is establishing relationships with the Mexican consulate—but most are found at home, with relatives, or with friends. They may be running *away* or running *to*, but most are doing both. For foster children who have been moved many times, the overwhelming feeling is that no one cares. As they get older, they may rebel against the rules that foster parents impose, and also be able to cope better with risky home situations. Most of all, they want to be with someone they know—friends or family who have made a commitment to them. Ms. Ploehn believes that approximately three-quarters of all runaways are 13 and above, and she will provide a breakdown of those numbers and as much information as possible on their reasons for running and whether they successfully re-engage with the department prior to aging out of the system.

In years past, the county convened a runaway task force whose work excluded probation youth AWOL from suitable placement, estimated to be between 500 and 600 youth. Commissioner Biondi strongly questioned this exclusion, particularly in terms of the Title IV-E waiver, through which DCFS and Probation would report to the Federal government on some youth but not on others. Ms. Ploehn could not answer for the Probation Department, but agreed that Probation and Mental Health liaisons to the Commission would be helpful in answering these kinds of questions.

Runaways in the most precarious position, Commissioner Kleinberg said, are those living on the streets, involved with drugs and alcohol, possibly prostituting themselves to survive. DCFS's Runaway Adolescent Project (RAP) served those youth

starting in the 1980s and Ms. Ploehn plans to revitalize the runaway unit that RAP evolved into, though without its van-based street outreach. She suggested that DCFS's P3 manager could give Commissioners more information on work with that population, and Chair Sorkin also asked for regular copies of the runaway reports.

The uncertainty of being on their own when they age out of the system can cause youth to bolt from placement, and Commissioner Rudnick suggested interventions to reassure them that they won't be abandoned, coordinating with the independent living program in some way. Although a good curriculum exists for older youth, Commissioner Williams said, the 14- to 16-year-old piece is not being implemented well and workers remain unaware of it. In fact, an audience member confirmed that ESTEP (Early Start to Emancipation Program) tutoring for 14- and 15-year-olds is no longer available through the Community College Foundation's contract with the county. Only academic assessments are now performed for that age group. (Because of the contract's slim funding, only a small percentage of eligible youth were referred to ESTEP in any case—between 1,000 and 1,400.)

CHAIR'S REPORT

- A required four-hour cultural diversity and sexual harassment training has been scheduled for Commissioners in early March. **Vice Chair Savelle moved that the Commission's regular meeting on March 3, 2008, be cancelled. Commissioner McClaney seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.** The training will be held on March 3 from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and Commissioners must be present for the full four hours or make arrangements to attend another county commission's training session.

Because of various Monday holidays, the Commission will hold regular meetings only once during each of the first three months of this year, and the idea of adding dates to make up for cancelled meetings was briefly discussed. The Commission has in the past convened on the Tuesday following a Monday holiday, but the feasibility of that plan depends on Commissioner schedules and room availability.

- Commissioners have been invited to participate in a focus group to be held as part of the upcoming Federal audit of the state's child welfare system. That process, in addition to reviewing individual cases, will convene major stakeholders within Los Angeles County on February 5, 2008, from 2:00 to 3:00 p.m. in the fourth-floor conference room at DCFS headquarters. Chair Sorkin asked Commissioners to let executive director Kim Foster know if they would like to attend. According to County Counsel's Katie Fesler, six or fewer Commissioners (just shy of a quorum) may participate before a formal Commission meeting must be convened.
- On December 22, Chair Sorkin attended a moving program at Camp Gonzales, where many of the 95 young men housed there participated in a play composed from poems they had written. Arts programs in the probation camps are tremendously important, and Chair Sorkin appreciated the chance to witness young people channeling their

energies in that way. Several former camp residents also attended, sharing positive, hopeful stories of how their lives had improved. Data shows that participation in arts programs leads to fewer arrests and incarcerations once young people leave placement, and Commissioner Biondi would love to see their curricula replicated throughout the camp system. Assessment tools seldom identify what motivates young people, and without specialized programs, it can be difficult to find ways to connect.

Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton encouraged other Commissioners to visit probation facilities, to become more educated about—and inspired by—what goes on there. She recently attended a program for girls in juvenile hall, for example, where the young women served tea and a dessert buffet, and shared some of their affecting poetry.

Probation liaison Andrea Gordon thanked Commissioners for their positive comments, recommending that for a full-circle look at how DCFS, Probation, and the Department of Mental Health work together, they might also visit the adult drug court to see the parents of DCFS and Probation children who are trying their best to free themselves from addiction in order to get their children back.

- Commissioner Murray will be honored by Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke at a Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday commemoration on January 11 at the H. Claude Hudson auditorium at King-Harbor Hospital, starting at 10:00 a.m.

STRUCTURED DECISION-MAKING VALIDATION STUDY

Structured decision-making manager Dick Santa Cruz distributed a narrative summary and decision flow-chart of SDM, which is a series of tools to help guide staff in single decisions at crucial times in a child's case, from the hotline call and initial risk and safety assessment, to more in-depth assessments of family strengths and needs, ongoing risks to the child, and reunification issues.

The SDM approach was originally developed by an arm of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, but moved into the child welfare system early on. It was introduced to California with a seven-county pilot in 1997, and Los Angeles County entered the pilot phase in 1999, deciding to fully implement the approach in 2002. By February 2004, all DCFS offices had completed SDM training and its tenets are now fully utilized department-wide. The program is a popular one, used with approximately 90 percent of the child welfare caseload in California, in 45 out of the state's 58 counties. Those counties resisting implementation, usually smaller in size, are often held back by the expense of the computer system needed to track SDM outcomes according to the state's requirements, or by feeling that formalized assessment tools are not really necessary. (In the 1990s, then-director of DCFS Peter Digre received a waiver for Los Angeles's non-participation in SDM, instead using his '21 points of light' approach to assessments.)

The first SDM validation study looked at 2,500 cases in the initial pilot's seven counties, but a 2003 validation study reviewed twice that number statewide, including about 500 from Los Angeles County. The most recent study, released a couple of months ago, reviewed more than 10,000 cases from 2005, about 4,600 of which were from Los

Angeles County. Adding in Orange and Riverside counties, about 70 percent of the studied cases were from the Southern California area.

Seeking to validate how well the SDM process predicts maltreatment, the study looked at families investigated between July 1 and December 31, 2005, reviewing data on various child protective services outcomes for 18 months following their assessment. (Particularly during that period, families with a history of domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues could take as long as two years to reunify, but no 'cherry-picking' of less difficult cases was done.) As the charts in the study's executive summary indicate, outcomes tended to vary by risk classification—low, moderate, high, and very high risk. Various refinements to the weighting of risk assessments are being proposed to make them function better, classifying fewer families as high- and very-high-risk while at the same time recognizing their higher likelihood of becoming involved in subsequent incidents of child abuse or neglect.

In response to Chair Sorkin, Mr. Santa Cruz said he would investigate the leap in sexual abuse reports from 6.6 percent to 11 percent (sexual, physical, emotional, and general abuse are categories used in the statewide system). Factors affecting adults, including drug use, are assessed in terms of their influence on the child; in other words, if an alcoholic mother is beating her children, that would be classified as physical abuse, while a heroin-addicted father could be squandering grocery or rent money on his habit, thereby contributing to the children's neglect. Even with infants that hospitals report as drug-exposed, a differentiation should be made between the babies of women who are long-time admitted drug users and those borne by teens who may have gotten high the night before their labor began. Likewise, if a mom arranges for responsible child care before going out to get drunk, her children remain protected. As Pamela Walker put it—the lead SDM trainer from California State University Long Beach—the department must consider the risk to the child, not whether it approves of how parents lead their lives. The SDM tool includes a safety assessment with eight mitigating options to work through. If the resources are not there to keep children safe, they are detained. However, many more opportunities exist now than in years past to leave children in the care of their parents with supports in place, often within DCFS's voluntary family maintenance section.

Unfortunately, most information on how substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health issues affect families is anecdotal, since those assessments are made only at the beginning of a case. 'Suspect, substantiate, and treat' data is not formally tracked in any organized way throughout the system, so claims like the juvenile court's, that 90 percent of families in the system have substance abuse issues, cannot be proved, and services cannot be developed in communities in any methodical fashion. Commissioners urged the development of a formal data collection and tracking system for these issues.

Mr. Santa Cruz's section also has plans to improve employee compliance on key performance indicators, including social-worker visits with children, the entry of those contacts into the computer system, and the timely creation of case plans and filing of court reports. (He distributed a summary handout regarding these plans, to be reviewed by senior man-

agers this month, and will make available the full management report and attachments as well.) Supervisorial involvement is key to connecting case work with individual families to compliance measures and state outcomes, Ms. Walker said, but managers must also become accountable for preventing detentions and reunifying families.

Rewards for high levels of compliance are used by supervisors in many offices at their own expense, ranging from stickers and candy to staff lunches. A more universal system of incentives, possibly including cash, will be explored to help give value to what all too often goes unrewarded. Plans also envision high-quality case work being assured through mandatory case readings, an idea that Commissioners applauded, although Commissioner Kleinberg stressed the additional involvement of someone who can look at cases from a parent's point of view.

Chair Sorkin asked that Commissioners wishing a copy of the full report notify Ms. Foster, and Commissioner Kleinberg requested copies of the SDM reports on a regular basis.

CONCURRENT PLANNING

When the Adoption and Safe Families Act was passed at the Federal level in 1997, it modified 1993's Family Preservation and Support Services Program, renaming it the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act. As legislation stepped up the timeline for achieving permanent placement for children in foster care, 'concurrent planning' moved to the fore. In this approach, permanent options for children other than returning to their families of origin (since that may ultimately fail) are considered from the beginning of a case, instead of when reunification efforts are exhausted, 18 months or more down the line.

This kind of parallel planning began in Los Angeles County in 2004 with protocols developed in part by a stakeholder work group. Concurrent planning manager Corey Hanemoto has worked on the program's redesign for the past three years, and he distributed a handout summarizing its major work shift changes.

- Instead of a case's automatically transferring to a second social worker after the termination of parental rights, **one social worker** handles all case management responsibilities for the life of the case (allowing for retirements, promotions, and other employee moves, of course).
- In tandem with the case-carrying regional worker, an **adoptions social worker provides all adoption-related services** as early in the case as is feasible, often prior to the six-month review hearing. The goal of front-loading the system with multiple workers is to more quickly get the child out of care and into a permanent home.
- Terminations of parental rights (TPRs), previously handled by family maintenance and reunification workers who may have been unfamiliar with the detailed process required, are now done by **TPR teams** of dependency investigators and clerical staff, experts in the specific legal technicalities. This will avoid court continuances caused by missed filing deadlines, incomplete forms, and so on. (Mr. Hanemoto estimated

that perhaps one-twelfth of all cases terminate parental rights, based on 2,000 finalized adoptions each year out of 22,000 to 24,000 children in out-of-home care.)

- A more **flexible framework**, arrived at through labor/management cooperation, allows for broader input and the development of best practices across DCFS's 17 regional offices. Regional administrators will get increased training and support, and engage in problem-solving on a monthly basis, bringing their feedback to the continuous improvement process (CIP) group that provides oversight for the initiative.
- A concurrent planning redesign team—three children's services administrators (CSA I) plus clerical staff—provides post-training **technical support** for concurrent planning, visiting each office every week, reviewing cases with workers, attending unit meetings, and working with management staff. The automated information services system available on the DCFS intranet, which adds extra data elements to information imported from the state site, will generate reports and reminders of needed actions broken out by office, unit, and worker.

Approximately 45 percent of children in care are placed with relatives, many of whom, for reasons of age or ill health, may not be able to continue as caregivers during the entire period before the child reaches age 18. What parallel planning is being done for those cases? In theory, the team decision-making conference that brings the extended family together at the start of the case will explore alternative plans, but several Commissioners would like special attention given to cases involving older relative caregivers—perhaps even convening another team decision-making conference—so that a 'Plan B' decision is made by the entire family, not just the workers. The goal is to involve the entire kin network in team decision-making, Mr. Hanemoto said, so that even if a grandmother is willing to take the child in the short term, for example, a long-term plan can be carried out with other family members if need be. Facilitators are all trained in full disclosure, and the concurrent planning assessment should consider all possible scenarios.

Historically, a dozen permanency planning liaisons met with families to talk about plans for adoption or legal guardianship. Following a training in December, adoption workers are now taking on that role, meeting with the child, the caregiver, and potential adoptive caregivers. Commissioner Williams expressed her gratification at hearing legal guardianship named as an alternative, since some families in relative care don't wish to adopt for a variety of reasons, and guardianship has seldom been seen as an option.

From the standpoint of the family, Commissioner Kleinberg cautioned, concurrent planning efforts may seem to be moving things along too fast. If the case is only in its fourth month and plans for what to do if reunification fails are already being made, parents may feel as if the department has given up on them. If they haven't been able to connect with needed services within that time, as is often the case, they may feel they haven't been given a chance. (Complicating the timeline further is the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act requirement that parents of children under age three have only six months to improve their functioning for reunification, and a case with multiple children is driven by

the age of the youngest family member.) The family-friendly communication called for in concurrent planning is all very well, but social workers are so overburdened that they often don't have time to arrange children's visits with their parents and siblings without help from human services aides, much less reassure families with constant information. According to Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton, caregivers continue to be confused about the adoption process and don't fully understand parallel planning efforts. She suggested more training to address those misgivings.

When Chair Sorkin served on the adoption committee four years ago, County Counsel reported that not all information on parental involvement was being received at intake, making the termination of parental rights more difficult. At present, Mr. Hanemoto said, a birth certificate must be in the file of every detained child, but TPR delays can still occur if the father's identity is in question or if the applicability of the Indian Child Welfare Act to a specific child is unknown. The 24-page form once required has been reduced to three smaller forms with questions specific to each worker's role, thus speeding the process and increasing the information in the file at the time of the court hearing.

Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton thanked Mr. Hanemoto and the adoptions division chief, Diane Wagner, for their excellent presentation, and Commissioner Biondi praised the improvement in practice with concurrent planning over the last two years.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

MEETING ADJOURNED